Earl of Fife

Whitehall

CONSIDERATIONS

ON THE

INTENDED REFORM

IN THE

Parliamentary Repreſentation

OF THE

PEOPLE.

Sanctus Amor Patriæ, dat animum.

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ERRATA.

Page 2, line 24, read *subject*.—P. 9, l. 10, read *competition*.—P. 10, l. 12, dele *I believe*.—P. 15, l. 6, read *counties*.—P. 15, l. 19, read *procedure*.

ERRATA.

CONSIDERATIONS, &c.

THE reform in the repreſentation of the people in Parliament, which the Miniſter is about to bring forward in the Houſe of Commons, is certainly a matter of very great importance in itſelf, and when the times and circumſtances are conſidered, that importance is much increaſed, and the queſtion may be found to involve in it the future fate of the Engliſh nation. On a matter of ſuch extent, I ſuppoſe every Engliſhman who is able to make up his mind on the ſubject, will ſtand acquitted from being urged by any vain motives for declaring his opinion to the world. And as in diſcuſſions of ſubjects which are of great magnitude, the matter, rather than the ſtyle, is to be regarded; it follows, that thoſe who ſeek information from communications made by others, will look for truth and ſound reaſoning, rather than elegance and the graces of compoſi-

tion. If the caſe were otherwiſe, I am ſo ſenſible of my deficiency in that way, that I ſhould hardly preſume to offer my ſentiments to the public.

I SHALL ſtate ſuch arguments as I have heard advanced in favour of a reform, and afterwards conſider the weight of them.

THE firſt is the undue influence of the crown, through the means of corruption, which ſo long as it continues unreſtrained, muſt tend to ſhake the very foundations of liberty. The ſecond, that the means in their nature beſt calculated for checking that power, are materially altered from their original inſtitution, I mean the power of the repreſentatives of the people in the Houſe of Commons. Many of the boroughs which are now repreſented, whatever their ſtate might have been formerly, are become intirely uſeleſs, as being without conſtituents, or fallen ſo greatly into decay as to have become the property of a few individuals. That in conſequence, boroughs coming under this deſcription, inſtead of aſſiſting to protect the liberty of the ſubjects, and maintain the equilibrium of the three eſtates, have adminiſtered to the undue influence of the crown, and alſo created

ated one ſpecies of corruption highly prejudicial to the conſtitution. I mean bribery at elections, either to independent voters for their ſuffrages, or to individuals who have an excluſive property in them. Theſe are the principal arguments upon the ground of which a reformation is contended for.

As a remedy to theſe diſorders it has been propoſed to disfranchiſe the rotten boroughs, and aboliſh the burgage tenures, and add to the number of members ſerving for counties, who are ſelected from a deſcription of men leaſt liable to the ſeduction of corrupt influence; and who can have no temptation to depart from the intereſt of the people. Another remedy propoſed, is the ſhortening the duration of parliaments, by which the connection between the conſtituent and the repreſentative is ſtrengthened, and that ſubſerviency to Miniſters which gentlemen are accuſed of, proportionably weakened.

PARLIAMENT heretofore has been found adequate to all the purpoſes of its inſtitution, when arbitrary power has been attempted to be introduced, for although (under different reigns) many attempts have been made upon the liberty of the country, they have been ſucceſsfully re-

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pelled; the ſtrength of the remedy, always keeping pace with the ſtrength of the injury intended. It is not probable that our conſtitution has any radical defects which have eſcaped the wiſdom of our forefathers: the great Charter, and the Bill of Rights, are the corner ſtones of our freedom, and the glorious Revolution brought about in 1688, certainly confirmed to Engliſhmen all their rights—with a knowledge of theſe things, can a man ſay the misfortunes the nation at preſent labours under have ariſen from radical defects in the conſtitution? I think they cannot. We muſt look for other cauſes, before we can preſcribe the remedy. It may ariſe either from maladminiſtration in the affairs of the kingdom by the ſervants of the crown, for the worſt of purpoſes, or it may ariſe from the general corruption of the people, which may not allow the executive power to act upon the principles of virtue and honour; or poſſibly the cauſe may lie between theſe extremes.

The diſaſters which have fallen upon great nations and brought them to ruin, are ſeldom found to have had their beginning and concluſion within the remembrance of one ſhort life; but unfortunately for this devoted country, we have ſeen ſuch a change in the ſtate of this nation,

tion, within the ſhort period of twenty years, as has aſtoniſhed the good people of England. The conſideration of our national diſgraces, which have been attended with the additional mortification of having been purchaſed with the vitals of the country, in men and treaſure, has been brought home to the boſom of every individual of the kingdom, from the diſtreſſes which have accompanied them, and which will, in all probability, bear down this country for generations to come;

"That England that was wont to conquer others
"Hath made a ſhameful conqueſt of itſelf."

SHAKESPEARE.

Seeing the effects which have been produced from cauſes ſecret, or not generally ſeen, it is not, I think, at all wonderful that the multitude ſhould fly to any alternative, which may promiſe a redreſs of their grievances; and amongſt others to a reform in Parliament. Many members in the Houſe of Commons would ſupport ſuch a meaſure, as being the wiſh of their conſtituents, and others to convince the public that they are free from the imputation of being indifferent to the proſperity of the nation.

It cannot be denied, that the preference (in the firſt inſtance) is due to that part of the repreſentation of the people which is compoſed of the country gentlemen. They are, if I may be allowed the expreſſion, attached to the ſoil itſelf. But on the other hand, the various articles of commerce with which Providence has ſo highly gifted this fair iſland, have been drawn forth, ſo as to produce that tranſcendent power which we had long enjoyed unrivalled, by the exertions of other claſſes of men, the merchant adventurers, and thoſe enterpriſing and bold ſpirits which the principles of our happy conſtitution naturally give birth to. From their exertions has grown our extenſive commerce, and the creation of our fleets to defend it, and thoſe manifold bleſſings which have followed our having the command of the ſea. This part of the empire is repreſented in Parliament (generally) by means of thoſe boroughs which are come-at-able for money, and therefore termed *rotten boroughs*; and I believe each of theſe conſtituent parts is as neceſſary for the welfare of the whole, as the workings of the mind is to conduct the operations of the body.

The borough repreſentation is compoſed of gentlemen of all deſcriptions, merchants, lawyers,

yers, ſeamen, and ſoldiers. It is by the boroughs, in a great degree, that the commerce of the kingdom is protected, and the balance between the landed and monied intereſt preſerved. Certainly the borough repreſentation leaves an opening for the admiſſion of ſtrangers into Parliament, and with it the poſſibility of as much merit as the nation can give. I ſay the poſſibility only, which I oppoſe to the objection made to the admiſſion of ſtrangers, namely, that they are more liable to be corrupted. But independant of this objection which I ſhall conſider by and by, I am not clearly of opinion that gentlemen of the vicinity are always the moſt eligible perſons to ſerve in Parliament. They may owe their election rather to local influence, than a preference due to goodneſs of character, either in point of ability or integrity.

THERE is likewiſe another conſideration which deſerves ſome attention. It is well known that it is the doctrine of Parliament, that a repreſentative is not to conſider himſelf as ſimply repreſenting his conſtituents, but when in debate, to conſider himſelf as a repreſentative of the nation at large. Were it otherwiſe, to procure ſome advantage to his borough, he might vote againſt the general good of the whole. Strangers

gers might perhaps, on this ground be more free to make a deciſion, than a member more intimately connected with his borough.

THAT the influence of the crown is increaſed far beyond its due bounds, was the ſenſe of a former Parliament, and is, I believe, the ſenſe of every independent man in the kingdom; however, I am not of opinion that a reform in Parliament will tend in any degree to remove, or even ſhake the undue influence of the crown, or which amounts to much the ſame thing, that there is any radical defect in the conſtitution of the Parliament, to which a remedy can be applied, which will operate to leſſen that influence.

I BELIEVE it is generally underſtood, that thoſe Members by whom the buſineſs of the nation is conducted in the Houſe, are not the county Members. They, from being much at their eaſe, and (generally ſpeaking) not having been under the neceſſity of exerciſing their talents by any extraordinary induſtry, in order to their advancement in life, leave the field open to thoſe who will acquire the neceſſary knowledge in every branch, and do the drudgery of the Houſe; but thoſe who have the labour, will have the

the power alſo, and a ſhare in thoſe good things, which adminiſtration have to give; much of the buſineſs of the nation, therefore, comes into the hands of the borough-members unavoidably. It follows in conſequence, that with the advantages annexed to place, thoſe members will be open to cenſure, not only upon juſt grounds, for their errors; but from being in ſituations which may excite, from motives of envy and competion, conſtructions which their conduct may not merit: and this may perhaps have been the origin of an opinion, that borough-members are more liable to the operation of the influence of the crown than the county members.

I SHALL not make any diſtinction between county and borough-members, on the ſcore of bribery in compaſſing their elections; becauſe I do believe that virtue and vice are diſſeminated pretty equally throughout the Houſe of Commons. And I believe, candidates for counties have felt the neceſſity of being liberal to their conſtituents, to as great a degree as candidates of any other deſcription: and if more members are added to the counties, the field will be extended for bribery to thrive in. Indeed, I do not think bribery can ever be aboliſhed, it fol-

lows great opulence, as naturally as the ſhadow follows the body. What is the application of many of the gifts which are in the power of the crown, other than ſo many irreſiſtible arguments to draw a veil before the judgments of men, and make them (ſometimes) even deceive themſelves?

On the ſcore of abilities it might be invidious to draw a compariſon between county and borough members. That the mind is inlarged, and the faculty of judging better eſtabliſhed by travel, there can be no doubt; and I believe that ſtyle of travelling which is undertaken ſolely for the purpoſe of acquiring knowledge, is, perhaps, more within the reach of county than borough members. But whether or not gentlemen who travel for improvement, have their talents ſo improved as to make them warmer advocates for liberty, and more ſtrenuous ſupporters of this excellent conſtitution than they would otherwiſe have been, I think may be doubted. My opinion is, that the powerful are *not* thoſe who ſee and feel the excellency of our government in the ſtrongeſt point of view. I ſpeak in general, for no doubt there are ſhining examples where this opinion is contradicted in particular inſtances.

It has been aſſerted that county members can have no temptation to depart from the intereſt of the people by deſign. I have ſeen no arguments to prove (even in the ſmalleſt degree) that county members are not to be ſeduced from their duty to the people, and become the humble ſervants of the crown, to as great an extent as borough members. All men are not to be tempted with the ſame thing. Some are ſatisfied with contracts in their various kinds, others with a ſituation which enables them to create a comfortable ſubſiſtence no-body knows how. Some men, who have all the ſolid enjoyments of life, are to have their imaginations tickled with empty titles, becauſe a ſuperabundant plenty has made them wanton and capricious. I do not mean to be ſevere upon any particular claſs of men; but ſimply to ſhew, that it is from the weakneſs of human nature, and not the weakneſs of the conſtitution of the Houſe of Commons, that our national misfortunes are to be imputed. County and borough members are alike obnoxious to the ſnares of temptation.

The great objection to a reform in Parliament, and which is founded in reaſon, is the danger leſt any material alteration ſhould ariſe to affect the balance which ought ever to be

preſerved between the commercial and the landed intereſt of the kingdom. Commerce is the ſoul of the nation, therefore the utmoſt attention is neceſſary to prevent its being oppreſſed, even in the ſmalleſt degree by the landed intereſt. This is not to be ſo effectually prevented by ſpeculative opinions, as by the interyention of thoſe members of the Houſe, who are merchants, and have an intereſt in its preſervation, and who ſee in its firſt ſymptoms every thing that has a tendency to injure it. In this commercial empire, the landed intereſt ſhould not preponderate, becauſe if commerce is ſhackled and kept down, the event in the end muſt be, that our importance as a maritime power will ſink, and the value of land ſink in proportion; but no ſuch effect can ariſe from the reſolutions of a Houſe of Commons favourable to the commercial intereſt of the kingdom.

It has been aſſerted alſo, that the preſent deplorable ſtate of the nation is owing to the inadequate repreſentation of the people; but it has been aſſerted without proof. I conceive the American war, and its conſequences, to have been one of the great cauſes of our preſent condition. I believe it is generally underſtood,

ſtood, that the Miniſter under whom that war was begun, and conducted throughout, was ſupported in it by the country gentlemen, and they were, I believe, amongſt the laſt, who (upon principle) abandoned that deſtructive project.

The noble Lord gulled them with the proſpect, that a revenue might, and ought to be obtained from America, which would in ſome degree leſſen the heavy burthens upon this country. That war brought on other wars, and the exertions made by England aſtoniſhed Europe. What heart does not bleed when they think of ſuch exertions ſo greatly miſapplied? this war, I underſtand, increaſed our national debt one hundred millions ſterling. The expenditure of this enormous ſum certainly afforded the miniſter the means of corruption, and I do in my conſcience believe, that war was continued latterly againſt the wiſhes of both the landed and commercial intereſt of the nation (and particularly of the latter) by ſuch means as no miniſter can openly avow. It is, I apprehend, from conſidering on the conſequences of the American war, rather than the war itſelf, that the people have conceived the proſperity of the nation has been ſacrificed, and from an inadequate repreſentation of the people.

Whereas

Whereas the idea of drawing a revenue from America began it, and the increaſed influence of the crown continued it.

I HAVE not any doubt, but that the undue influence of the crown has been one great cauſe of the calamities we are now ſuffering. I know not whether I am ſingular in my opinion, but I think the King's Miniſters have uniformly purſued a conduct, hoſtile to the rights of the people, and the honour of the crown: under ſuch circumſtances, what ſhould the operation of the American war be, other than we have ſeen it?

LORD NORTH as a Miniſter certainly merits no praiſe: for whether in his miniſtry he acted as the deputy to a ſecret influence; or whether he ſuffered thoſe under him to uſe his influence to produce unworthy purpoſes, he alone ſtands reſponſible. But whatever the noble Lord's conduct might have been as a Miniſter, his abilities are reſpectable; and the nation has only to lament, that thoſe uſeful talents ſhould have been ſo greatly miſapplied. Lord North contended in a very able ſpeech in the Houſe, againſt any reform in the repreſentation. I dare ſay, he very well knows, that our diſ-

graces

graces have not ariſen from defects in our government; and therefore was againſt an innovation, which (to uſe his own words) was to ſhake and unhinge the conſtitution.

Admitting there were added fifty Members to the countries, and that they were the moſt competent to the ſervice of the country; is it a decided fact, that they are the beſt guardians of the public liberty and public credit? I think it may very well admit of a doubt, becauſe they are open to the ſnares of temptation, and are as liable to fail in the truſt repoſed in them, as other men. Let it be conſidered, how greatly the peerage is increaſed very recently, and, I believe, it will be readily granted to be a poſſible caſe, that it may hereafter be conſidered as a matter of courſe, that an election for a county is to be followed by a peerage; ſuch a proceedure may be continued to the extent I mention, and naturally enough follow what has been already done.

By ſuch a conduct, it is true, the crown might eſtabliſh a power in the Houſe of Commons, adequate to the effecting any purpoſe, but it would be for a time only; for in proportion as the power of the Houſe of Commons became weak

weak and languid, the Houſe of Peers would become formidable to the executive power, by which the balance of the three eſtates would be deſtroyed. What the conſequences in ſuch a caſe would be, no man can foreſee; but probably it would produce a ſtruggle between the executive power and the Lords, which might in the event deſtroy the liberty of the nation for ever.

Now will any man pretend to ſay from what has paſſed in this kingdom, within the laſt twenty years, that the people have any foundation to hope material benefit from any innovation in the conſtitution. Ought we not rather endeavour to avoid ſo dangerous an experiment, and look upon it with a ſuſpicious eye. It would certainly be much wiſer to overſet the doctrine which has lately been broached on the ſubject of the Weſtminſter ſcrutiny in the Houſe of Commons, and endeavour to preſerve the rights of the electors of Weſtminſter, which have been groſly violated.

When it is conſidered that the Miniſter who is to bring forward the motion for a reform in Parliament, is the man who oppoſed the people of Weſtminſter from being heard by

council

council at the bar of the Houſe, in defence of their rights on this very ſubject, it muſt be concluded, either that the Miniſter means to ſtir a buſineſs in which he is not ſerious, or which he means to pervert to ends widely different from the wiſhes of the people.

That there are defects in the repreſentation is true, but they are defects which are beſt explained by aſking what is there in the world quite perfect? Time has certainly wrought ſome change in the conſtitution, but though in the change it may have loſt in ſome points, it has as certainly gained in others. And it ſhould, I think, be remembered, that time has alſo eſtabliſhed thoſe ſacred rights, upon which our liberty reſts; and then a conſideration will ariſe, whether the benefits intended by what is called a reformation, may not be more than counterbalanced by the evil conſequences it may lead to.

The defects in the repreſentation are thoſe boroughs, either where there are no conſtituents, or where the right of election is confined to the property of an individual, and where conſequently the original intention of the legiſlature is defeated. But palpable as theſe defects

 are,

are, I know not upon what grounds boroughs coming under this deſcription can be deprived of their preſcriptive right of returning members to Parliament, to aboliſh it *would be little leſs than ſuicide in a Parliament.**

But if thoſe who hold boroughs in property, would follow the example of the proprietor of Old Sarum (who expreſſed his willingneſs that the right of returning members for that place might be veſted in the proprietors of the Bank of England) and ſuffer their boroughs to be adminiſtered by ſuch corporate bodies in the kingdom as Parliament ſhould judge moſt eligible, it might be productive of good, whether or not gentlemen will be ſo public ſpirited I know not. But I think the offer of Old Sarum may nevertheleſs be accepted.

I am clearly of opinion, that the number of repreſentatives ſhould be neither encreaſed nor diminiſhed; but if any mode could be fallen upon (with the conſent of the proprietors) to make the repreſentation of the boroughs above alluded to, more effectually beneficial to

* *Vide* Dialogues concerning the Law and Conſtitution of England.

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the nation, by renewing what muſt have been the original intention of the legiſlature, it might help to reſtore vigour to the conſtitution, without in any reſpect endangering it.

HAVING explained upon what grounds I am averſe to any alteration which muſt affect the frame of the Houſe of Commons, either in form or ſubſtance; and thinking as I do, that the undue influence of the crown is one great cauſe of our misfortunes, the adoption of any meaſure, that might in its operation have the effect of leſſening it, would relieve the conſtitution of the kingdom of many of its obſtructions, and tend to purify it. I cannot conceive any ſingle remedy which promiſes ſo much efficacy towards that end, as the ſhortening the duration of Parliament.

BY giving the people a more frequent opportunity of marking, by their approbation, or diſapprobation, the conduct of their repreſentatives, that ſubſerviency in members of Parliament to the will of the crown, which is alledged againſt them, would certainly be checked, if not entirely broken. It is evident that the oftener the people are called upon to make their election, the ſtronger and more intimate the

connection will be between them and their repreſentatives. And unleſs it is ſuppoſed that the body of the people is corrupt, (which I am very unwilling to believe) there muſt reſult from it more attention from members to the intereſt of the public; who, if they betray their truſt, will ſoon be taught by their conſtituents, in what light they conſider them.

I WILL not take upon myſelf to ſay, (taking all circumſtances into conſideration) whether three or five years, inſtead of ſeven, would be preferable, but certainly the ſhorter term would operate moſt effectually to the relief of the evils complained of.

THE principal argument in objection to this has been, that the frequency of general elections would greatly increaſe bribery amongſt the people, and deſtroy their morals and the ſpirit of induſtry, by drawing them from the occupations, by which alone, for the proſperity of the ſtate, they ought to maintain themſelves and families.

SOME regard is certainly due to this objection; but I think it is by no means ſuch an one as ought to be put in the balance, when oppo-

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ſed to the probable advantages which would ariſe from having ſhorter parliaments; would it not be wiſe to riſque this inconvenience, when it is to produce benefits ſo ſubſtantial? The frequency complained of, would certainly reduce the great expence and rioting that now attend elections. The reaſons I need not mention, they are obvious enough.

In treating on the ſubject of a reform in the parliamentary repreſentation, volumes might be written; but after ſaying every thing that could be ſaid upon it, and adopting the wiſeſt meaſures that circumſtances would allow, the good operation of them would depend in a very high degree upon the ſupport to be given them by the Sovereign, ſeconded by the integrity and ability of thoſe whom he may delegate to manage the affairs of his government; and indeed without making any change at all in the repreſentation of the people, theſe are means ſufficient for producing the ends intended by ſuch a change.

FINIS.